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ABSTRACT

This study investigated what changes in the television-personality and presidential images of the candidates would occur among first-time young voters due to the first presidential debate. Subjects, 116 18- or 19-year-old students at Purdue University, completed semantic differential forms, before and after the debate, which rated the concepts of ideal president, Ford as president, Carter as president, Ford as a television performer, and Carter as a television performer. About half the subjects were assigned to watch the debate, while the other students were free to watch as much or as little as they wished. Findings show that the candidates' television-image ratings showed the most change; following the debate, Ford's ratings moved closer to the ideal and Carter's moved farther away, and both candidates were rated as having much less warmth. The greatest differences between Ford and Carter on presidential image occurred on the wise, experienced, fair, calm, and liberal scales, with Carter perceived more negatively (except for liberal, which depended on the political views of the respondent for positive or negative weight). (JM)

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EFFECTS OF THE FIRST 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE ON CANDIDATE'S IMAGES

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The 1960 Great Debates are often considered a crucial factor in the presidential election contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. The 1976 presidential debates may have been of equal importance in deciding the race between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. One way to discern the debate's effect is by observing changes in the way voters perceive the personal qualities of the candidates. Because of the importance of the television medium, the viewer's perceptions of the candidates as PRESIDENT and as A TV PERFORMER were measured before and after the first debate. The shifts in candidate profile over time, and the relative movement between candidates should serve as indicants of the effect of the debate on voter opinion.

This research basically replicated a 1960 study by Tannenbaum, Greenberg and Silverman [1] of the Nixon-Kennedy debates. Using a semantic differential instrument, they found that "the adversaries became more disparate [in the viewer's mind] as the campaign progressed. Furthermore, it is apparent that this disparity was more a function of a pronounced negative trend in the Nixon profiles than of any major positive change in the Kennedy image." Their main conclusion was: "Kennedy did not necessarily win the debates, but Nixon lost them."

The same instrument was used in this study, but the subjects and candidates differ. Young, first-time voters, operationalized as 18- or 19-year-old college students, were chosen because it was thought that they would be less set in their political preferences and more open to influence from the debate. Therefore, the research question was: For first-time, young voters, what changes in the television and presidential images of the candidates would occur due to the debate?

METHOD

Subjects: The subject group comprised 116 18- or 19-year-old students enrolled in the beginning communication course at Purdue University. Of the 112 Ss that expressed a political party preference, 43 were Republican, 37 were Democratic, and 32 considered themselves Independent (not members of the American Independent Party). All but 18 Ss were registered to vote at the beginning of the study. Sixty females plus 56 males composed the subject group.

Apparatus: A 12-scale semantic differential form was used to rate the concepts of IDEAL PRESIDENT, FORD AS PRESIDENT and CARTER AS PRESIDENT. The addition of six scales created an 18-scale test for the concepts of FORD AS A TV PERFORMER and CARTER AS A TV PERFORMER. The bipolar adjectives used were the same as Tannenbaum's and are presented in Figures 1 and 2. However, subjects received the scales in random order and with the positive and negative adjectives' positions switched randomly.

The instrument had performed consistently in the original 1960 study, according to Tannenbaum, et. al.:

> No matter how we chose to analyze the data, through profile comparisons, or D^2 measurements across time periods, or D^2 measurements across concepts within the same time period... the findings showed internal agreement.

For this study, the concepts and scales were printed as a paper-and-pencil in-class questionnaire. The subjects could circle numbers from one to seven on each scale to indicate their ratings.

PROCEDURE

Subjects rated all five concepts on Monday, September 20, 1976. The first debate occurred Thursday, September 23. On Friday, September 24, subjects again rated all the concepts, except for IDEAL PRESIDENT, which was expected to remain stable over the short time interval.

Approximately half the subjects were assigned to watch some of the debate by their teacher as a class assignment. The remaining subjects were free to view as much or as little

of the debate as they pleased. In either case, the subjects were not forewarned of the post-debate testing.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the ratings of each candidate before and after the first debate, and the subjects' concept of an ideal president. It is apparent that following the debate, most of Ford's ratings moved closer to the ideal, while most of Carter's ratings moved further away from the ideal.

The exceptions are notable. Both candidates were rated much less warm after the debate. This may have been caused by the debate format, the statistic-laden subject matter, or the nervousness of the participants. Before the debate, Carter was rated very close to the ideal on the warm, liberal and young scale. Following the debate, Carter lost greatly on warmth, as discussed above, and he was rated much more liberal and slightly younger than the ideal.

The greatest differences between Ford and Carter on their presidential images occur on the wise, experienced, fair, calm, and liberal scales, with Carter being perceived more towards the negative side (except for liberal, where the positive or negative valence depends on the political views of the respondent). However, Carter remains closer to the ideal on the cool, young and liberal scales following the debates.

Figure 2 presents the images of the candidates as TV performers on the 18 scales. Following the debate, Carter moved negatively on all scales, while Ford shifted in a positive direction on nearly all scales. The final six items on the chart are the specific 'TV' scales. It is interesting to note that Ford's image is 'better' than Carter's on all six, especially on interesting, sharp and relaxed where Carter had led Ford prior to the debate.

The total candidate profiles, calculated by summing the scores on each scale, are shown in Table 1. Subjects, whatever their party allegiance, had similar images of an ideal president. Both before and after the debate, members of a party rated that party's candidate higher than the opposition, as could be expected. Independents fell in between.

The shifts in scores following the debate may indicate a change in subjects' perceptions. Subjects from each party rated Ford slightly better on his presidential image, but Carter lost significantly from all groups.

The TV performer images were affected even more strongly. Following the debate, Ford was rated much higher than before, and Carter was rated much lower. This shift in image perception occurred regardless of the party affiliation of the rater. Even Democrats rated Ford higher and Carter lower, although not to the same degree as Republicans.

These shifts following the debate seem to be related to the length of time the debate was viewed by a subject. Table 2 presents total candidate profiles by viewing time. The post-debate questionnaire asked how much of the debate had been seen; the response choices were: None, 30 min., 60 min., 90 min. Frequencies for each category were roughly equal. In this analysis, the categories were collapsed; Ss indicating None or 30 min. of viewing are light viewers, those marking 60 min. or 90 min. are heavy viewers.

For FORD AS PRESIDENT, light viewers rated him nearly the same following the debate; heavy viewers rated Ford somewhat more positively. For CARTER AS PRESIDENT, light viewers rated him nearly the same after the debate; but heavy viewers rated Carter significantly lower.

Again, the TV images show greater changes. FORD AS A TV PERFORMER made a significant gain among light viewers and an even larger gain among heavy viewers. CARTER AS A TV PERFORMER made similar shifts, but in the opposite direction. Light viewers drop Carter seven points, while heavy viewers down-rate him by more than fourteen points.

Table 3 summarizes the shifts in comparative candidate images. The mean distance between the total candidate profiles, or between a candidate and the ideal are calculated. Prior to the debate, Carter is slightly behind Ford on the presidential scales. After the debate, Carter is significantly further behind Ford in the subjects' perceptions. Ford's presidential

image shows a slight, but not significant, move towards the ideal following the debate. Carter's presidential image moves significantly further away from the ideal on the post-debate measurement.

The TV performer ratings again show greater changes. Ford was slightly behind Carter before the debate. Following the encounter, Ford took a significant lead, as a result of his increase on the TV performer scales and Carter's plummet, as noted in Table 2.

By comparing the twelve common semantic differential items in both presidential and TV performer ratings, the differences in the images can be computed. Ford has a significant difference between his presidential image and his TV performer image prior to the debate. The two images converge following the debate. This may mean the viewer's perceptions of Ford as President and as a TV periormer have become consistent. Carter's presidential rating is below his TV performer rating before the debate. Following the debate, Carter's presidential image is better than his TV image.

Another interesting facet of the candidate images is shown in Table 4, which presents the mean and variance scores for the five concepts tested. It is interesting to note that in all cases the variance in Carter's scores is much higher than in Ford's scores. This may be an indication that Ford is more of a 'known quantity' and that subjects share a common image of the man, since the spread of scores is relatively less than for Carter. On the other hand, Carter's high variance in scores may demonstrate the 'fuzziness' of his image for the subjects.

DISCUSSION

The debate was the first opportunity for many voters to see the candidates for any length of time. Although the TV production features of the debate program were designed to minimize the affective components, the show still provided an opportunity for viewers to draw inferences about the men on the basis of their composure, physical qualities and vocal cues.

Impressions of the candidates, apart from their issue positions, seem to have been conveyed during the debate. Since the candidates' TV image ratings showed the most change, perhaps the subjects viewed the debate as a TV event, as well as an indication of their ability to hold office. Also, the large shifts in TV image may indicate differences between a candidate's TV image as portrayed in political commercials and short news segments compared to the image conveyed over a sustained period of time.

The role of these perceptions in the overall judgment of the candidate is not yet clear, but deserves careful consideration. With the predominance of television in the election campaign communication process and the forecast of regular presidential candidates debates in 1980 and beyond, the effect of the medium on voter's perceptions seems to be a salient area for further research.

Reference:

[1] Percy H. Tannenbaum, Bradley S. Greenberg and Fred R. Silverman, "Candidate Images," in The Great Debates, ed. by Sidney Kraus (Bloomington, Indiana University Press) 1962.

TABLE 1: Total Candidate Profiles by Party Affiliation

	Pre-debate	Post-debate	
IDEAL PRESIDENT			
Democrats	63.76		N=37
Republicans	66.00		N=43
Independents	63.75		N=32
FORD AS PRESIDENT			
D	49.38*	51.24*	
R	55 93*	56.58*	
I	52.25*	53.15*	
CARTER AS PRESIDENT			
D	56.49*	53.92*	
R	48.74*	45.19*	
I	48.06*	46.12*	
FORD AS A TV PERFORMER			
D	70.35*	76.89*	
R	77.60*	86.60*	
I	72.53*	81.69*	
CARTER AS A TV PERFORMER			
D	83.70*	75.16*	*=significant differences
R	75.93*	64.16*	
I	73.31*	66.53*	$p<.05$ t-test

TABLE 2: Total Candidate Profiles by Viewing

	Pre-debate	Post-debate	
FORD AS PRESIDENT			
Light viewers	52.14	52.53*	N=55
Heavy viewers	53.59	55.93*	N=51
CARTER AS PRESIDENT			
Light viewers	48.71	48.51	
Heavy viewers	52.45	47.20	
FORD AS A TV PERFORMER			
Light viewers	72.34	79.82*	
Heavy viewers	75.74	85.12*	
CARTER AS A TV PERFORMER			*=significant difference
Light viewers	77.40	70.42*	$p<.05$ t-test
Heavy viewers	78.39	64.27*	

TABLE 3: Mean Distances Between Candidates (N=116)

	Pre-debate	Post-debate
CARTER-PRESIDENT/FORD-PRESIDENT	-1.776	-5.638*
IDEAL PRESIDENT/FORD-PRESIDENT	11.784	10.741
IDEAL PRESIDENT/CARTER-PRESIDENT	13.560	16.379*
FORD-TV/CARTER-TV	-1.526	8.388*
+FORD-PRES./FORD-TV	3.155	-0.724*
+CARTER-PRES./CARTER-TV	-1.302	2.026*

*=significant difference $p<.05$ t-test

+=comparison of 12 common scales in both presidential and TV performance ratings

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TABLE 4: Means and Variance for Total Candidate Profile(N=116)

	Pre-debate	Post-debate
IDEAL PRESIDENT		
mean	64.68	
variance	54.93	
FORD AS PRESIDENT		
mean	52.90	53.94
variance	63.15	48.70
CARTER AS PRESIDENT		
mean	51.12	48.30
variance	126.32	105.95
FORD AS A TV PERFORMER		
mean	73.72	82.26
variance	164.72	132.61
CARTER AS A TV PERFORMER		
mean	77.63	68.21
variance	219.63	233.12

CANDIDATES AS PRESIDENT

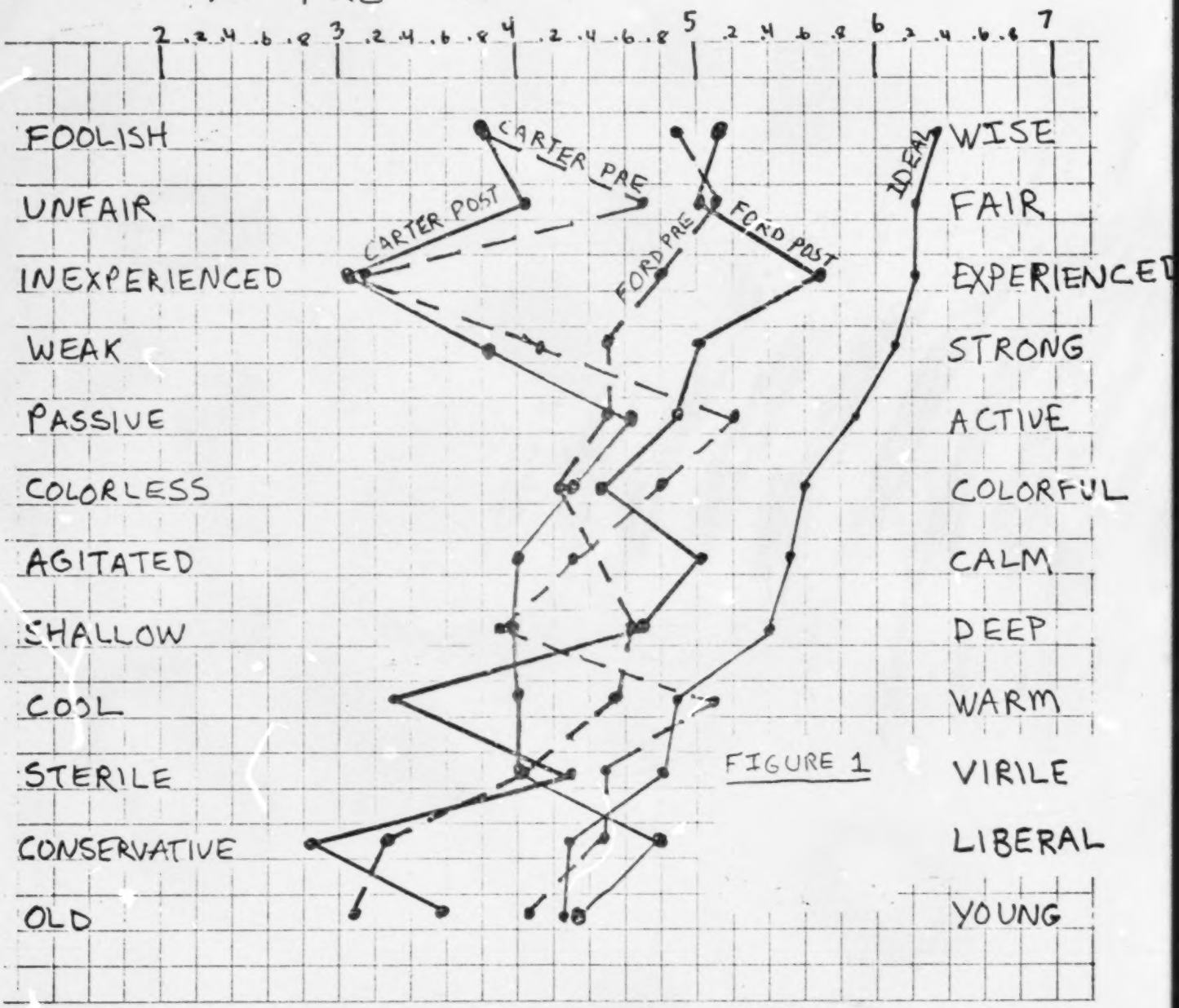

FIGURE 1

- - - CARTER PRE-DEBATE

—— CARTER POST-DEBATE

—— IDEAL PRESIDENT

- - - FORD PRE-DEBATE

—— FORD POST-DEBATE

CANDIDATES AS A TV PERFORMER

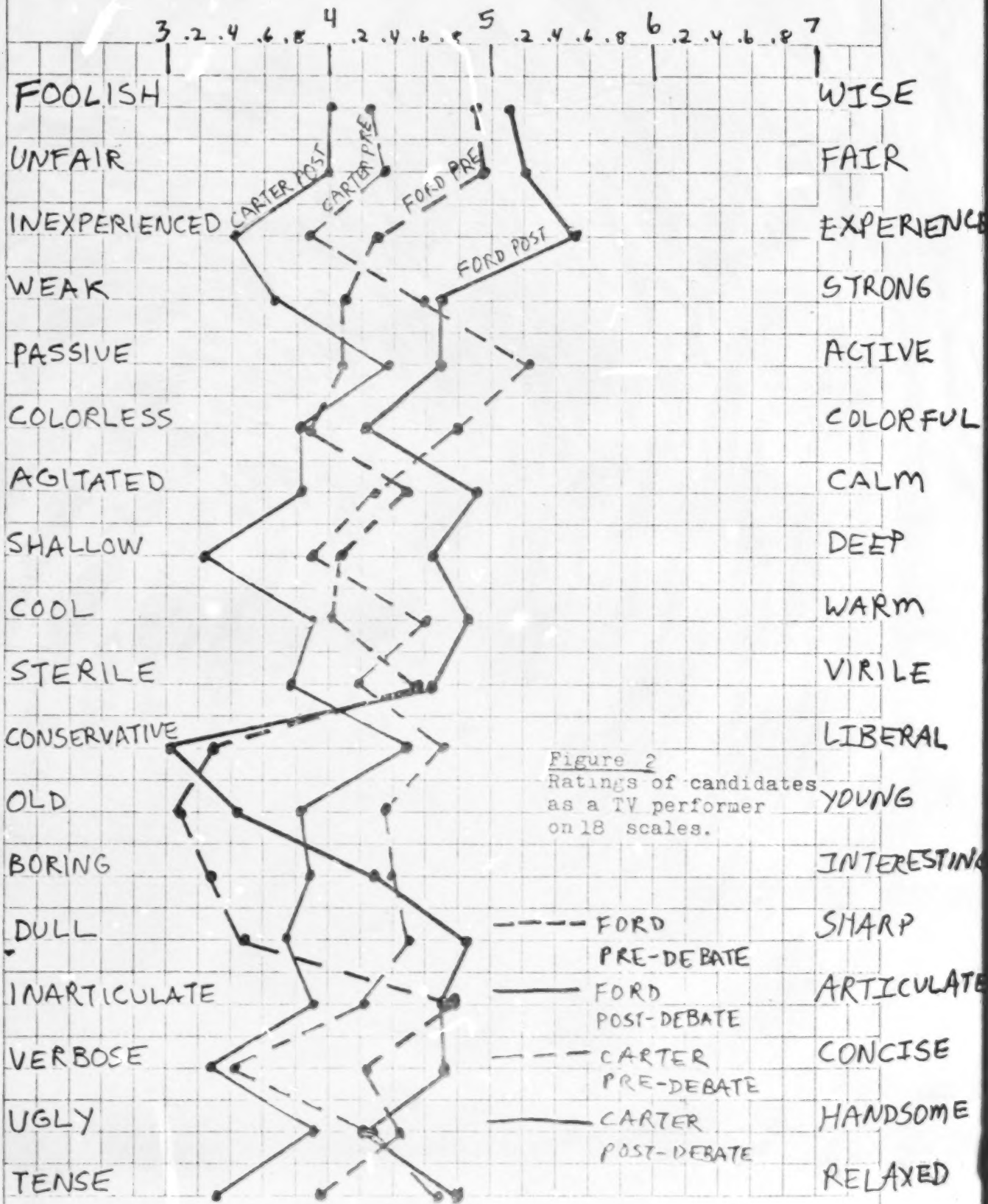

Figure 2
Ratings of candidates as a TV performer on 18 scales.

BY _____ DATE _____

READ BY _____ DATE _____